

# William James

## JOHN R SHOOK ON THE MAN AT THE CENTRE OF AMERICA'S "GOLDEN AGE OF PHILOSOPHY"

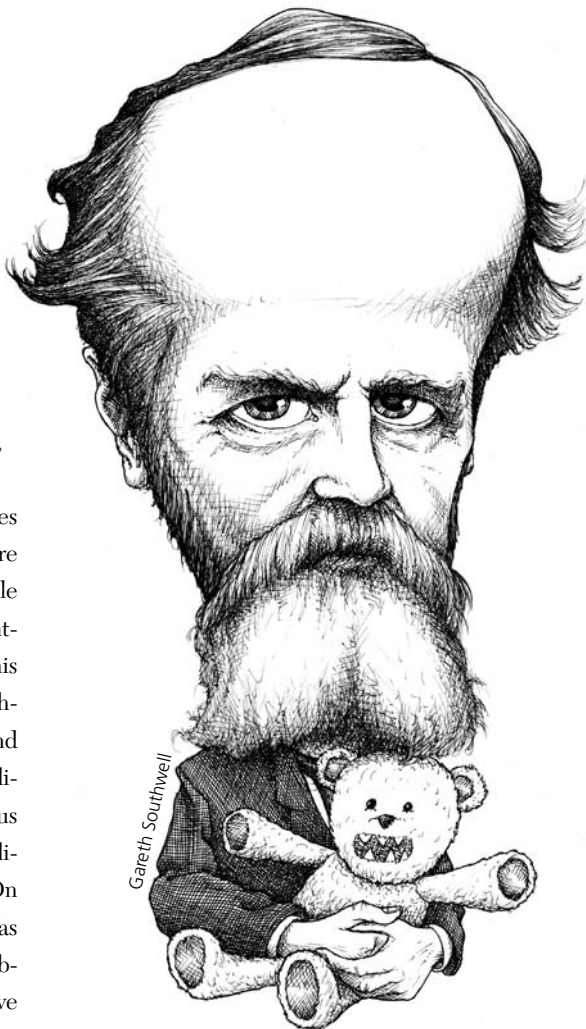
**W**illiams James (1842–1910) was a Harvard professor of psychology and philosophy at the centre of America's "golden age of philosophy". He had quickly accepted Darwin's theory of evolution, graduated with the Harvard MD in 1869, and began teaching physiology at Harvard in 1872. His primary interest was the new experimental psychology that he studied during travels to Europe, and James founded the first psychological laboratory in America at Harvard in 1875. His early theories about reflexive emotion and unconscious cognition, now encapsulated in the "James-Lange" theory of emotion, were powerfully influential. His *Principles of Psychology* (1890) was the most important English-language work on the mind since Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) practically inaugurated the field of psychology of religion, and it has deeply influenced philosophy of religion as well.

Perhaps most importantly, James publicised the movement of pragmatism and supplied much of its powerful momentum. His famous book *Pragmatism* was published in 1907, and together with Charles Peirce and John Dewey, he challenged every rationalist and metaphysical dogma. A series of journal articles published during 1904–09 presented his theories about radical empiricism, knowledge, and truth; they were collected together for *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1911). Two more books presenting his explorations of experience and reality, developing his vision of a pluralistic metaphysics, were completed before he died: *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911).

As James explored the implications of his psychological research, his radical empiricism and naïve realism were taken most seriously during the early phases of functional and behavioural psychology, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and process philosophy. James personally knew and professionally debated most of the

dominant philosophers of his age, such as Henri Bergson and F H Bradley along with Bertrand Russell and George Santayana. James's thought continued to hold the close interest of following generations, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, A N Whitehead, G H Mead, and J J Gibson.

James's notable terminology still resonates today: the "stream of consciousness" and "pure experience"; the "social self" and our "multiple selves"; distinguishing knowledge "by acquaintance" from knowledge "by description"; his defences of the "will to believe" and the "cash-value of truth"; his rejection of both "soft" and "hard" determinism; his disdain for "moral holidays" in favour of keeping up one's "strenuous mood"; and his distinction between the religiously "healthy soul" and the "sick soul". On truth, James notoriously declared, "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot." James's sophisticated examinations of intellect, inquiry, and knowledge successfully deflated the pretentious philosophies of his time, from neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian transcendentalisms and absolutisms to rationalistic dualisms and reductive materialisms. James regarded himself as a public philosopher, and many of his essays were prepared for large audiences. Did his view halt at supposing that the true is the useful and the useful is the true? Not really. Even as James's simpler dictums about pragmatism composed for wide hearing were getting critiqued and ridiculed in professional journals (echoing in epistemology textbooks to this day), his profound insights into actual human inquiry and learning were helping to set the stage for many of the twentieth century's



later advances in psychology, sociology, and other social and cognitive sciences.

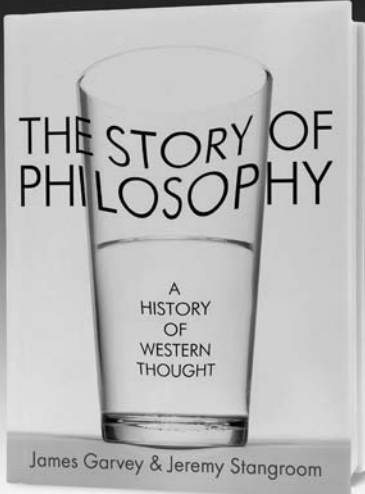
Who are the heirs of James today? One 'stream' of William James flowed through Horace Kallen, W E B Du Bois, and G H Mead on to a richer understanding of our multiple selves navigating the multiculturalism of pluralistic societies. Another related stream aided John Dewey and pragmatic progressives trying to mould pluralistic social selves into the civic-minded citizens needed for participatory democracy. The way that James championed the power of the unconscious and the emotional streamed into much psycho-sociological research since his day. James's stream of thought about the human organism learning by

doing in a shifting environment infused the denial by behavioural psychologies that knowledge is the passive acquisition of static representations. This inspired ecological psychology, and more recently, its new ally in embodied and enactive cognitive science. Another related stream from the headwaters of radical empiricism has inspired several varieties of existentialist and phenomenological systems of thought.

Why read James today? If not for any of those rich streams, then perhaps because James was above all the most human and democratic of philosophers. As he wrote, “[I]f we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we may wait if we will – I hope you do not think

that I am denying that – but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we act, taking our life in our hands. No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom – then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism’s glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.”

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